

Private beliefs and public acts

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Archbishop Charles Chaput has characterized President John F. Kennedy's 1960 address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association as "sincere, compelling, articulate -- and wrong" ([See story \[1\]](#)). It would be easier to agree with the archbishop if his own arguments were not also wrong, and wrong in ways that will prove as unfruitful for the future of Catholicism's relationship with American culture as he claims Kennedy's arguments were.

Chaput is one of those conservative thinkers who make extravagant claims for the religiosity of the American founding. In responding to Kennedy's call for an "absolute" separation of church and state, Chaput says: "The trouble is, the Constitution doesn't say that. The founders and framers didn't believe that. And the history of the United States contradicts that. Unlike revolutionary leaders in Europe, the American founders looked quite favorably on religion." This reading of history is something less than accurate. Anytime someone refers to "the founders" the first question is always, "Which founder?" Jefferson, the most philosophically inclined of the founders, certainly believed in an absolute separation of church and state, as did Thomas Paine, who was probably the most influential founder, although he never sat in Congress.

There is a deeper problem however. The American founding presents itself to Chaput and others as a religious event only because it occurred in the brief heyday of Deism. The God that most of the founders worshiped set the world a-going, but he was not inclined to interfere in the lives of men and women. Americans today are more likely than not to worship one kind of interfering God or another. This is important because the purpose of the constitutional separation of church and state was to keep theological disputes from interfering with the business of government, and vice versa. The Protestant ministers Kennedy addressed were themselves content with theological influence on government provided that influence came from their own traditions, but they were hostile to the idea of Catholic ideas shaping the government, a hostility that is well documented in the writings of such founders as traditionalists like John Jay and John Adams, as well as firebrands like Jefferson and Paine.

Yet, Chaput is clearly advocating theological interference in politics. And he is right to do so. Kennedy was wrong to draw such a sharp distinction between his personal, private beliefs and his public acts. Strangely, Chaput prefaced his indictment of Kennedy by noting that he himself was not speaking as an archbishop but as a citizen, making precisely the kind of distinction for which he then faults Kennedy.

Still, Chaput is right to wonder: If the actions and policies of men and women in public life are not shaped by their beliefs, what does shape those actions and policies? Indeed, one of America's finest political achievements was the passage of the Civil Rights Act. That law was deeply influenced by the "private, personal beliefs" of leaders like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. Chaput should, however, acknowledge that Kennedy's use of the word *privacy* was different, at least in legal significance, from the term as it was subsequently employed by the Supreme Court.

In the years after *Roe v. Wade*, many Catholic legislators would invoke Kennedy's distinction between private beliefs and public acts and say, "You can't legislate morality." But, of course, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was

a very specific legislation of morality. When Mario Cuomo argued in 1984 that a moral consensus must exist if morally fraught legislation is to be passed, he misunderstood the degree of opposition to the Civil Rights Act that existed in the South: There was no consensus. Chaput is right to insist that there is nothing per se objectionable to a politician's moral vision influencing his or her political stances.

We at *NCR* agree with Chaput that the perceived gulf between religion and politics that Kennedy suggested may have been necessary for his election in 1960, but it is not necessary for the flourishing of the American Republic. Indeed, the active involvement of religiously inspired citizens and politicians holds out the possibility of enriching our nation's political discourse precisely because the Gospel always stands in solidarity with the poor and in critique of the culture, especially of the powerful within a culture. We only wish that the archbishop were as suspicious of his own conclusions as he is of Kennedy's. His presuppositions are not shared by many of his fellow citizens and he needs to be mindful of that fact if he seeks to persuade them. For while it is undoubtedly the case that the conscience of a Catholic must be informed by the teachings of the church, it is also the case that the legitimate use of the coercive power of law in a pluralistic society is a more complicated thing than Chaput allows. Clerics in the public square should exhibit humility as well as clarity.

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